

A liberal resurrected

THE BIRTH OF INDIAN LIBERALISM: MAMA PARMANAND'S LETTERS TO AN INDIAN RAJA
Edited and introduced by Rahul Sagar, Juggernaut, ₹899



Narayan Mahadev Parmanand

sionate editors, who dabbled in serious journalistic activity, to peripatetic, ascetic reformers, who travelled through princely states and held up their record of governance and social apathy in correspondence, Parmanand took his lessons seriously to engage with reform and public service. His medium was both the press as well as service in government establishments that gave him access to information, which constituted the basis of his ideas.

One of the compelling strands that come out in the Introduction is the dynamics of princely rule and its interactions with British officials who were very often complicit in actions of misrule. We get fascinating glimpses of life under eccentric rulers whose transition to modernity was ragged and whose misdeeds became the subject matter of journalistic *exposés*. Parmanand was predictably disheartened at the state of affairs in native states and at British corruption and, therefore, rightfully pes-

simistic about the possibility of liberal reform, especially in the wake of the failures of Lord Ripon in seeing through the passage of the Ilbert Bill. However, he did not entirely lose hope in the potential for liberal reform in princely states, especially in Baroda where Sayaji Rao Gaekwad Rao had initiated a programme of improvement. His direct contact with Sayaji Rao was the context in which Parmanand penned his famous letters.

One of the concerns of Parmanand was to highlight biases in European reporting of native states and their disposition. Given his proximity to actual administration in both British-ruled India and

princely states, he was able to critically tease out particularities of local contexts and suggest an agenda for improvement and responsible State-building on liberal principles. Parmanand was one among many such liberal intellectuals who wrote with great enthusiasm, commented on contemporary issues and saw possibilities for reform through education and application of a secular and scientific outlook. It is to Sagar's credit that he brings out the multifaceted dimensions of a personality like Parmanand who battled medical conditions and material deprivation and built his reputation as a political recluse assiduously and effectively.

How do the letters to a *raja* read as exemplary illustrations of Indian liberal theory as Sagar argues? It is difficult to position him within the lineage of liberal thinkers we are more familiar with. It would have helped had Sagar identified clear convergences and divergences with others, especially those located in Maharashtra. How distinct were the Elphinstonians (of whom Parmanand was one) from, say, the Derozians of Calcutta? Such a comparison could have validated more effectively the depth of the liberal imagination in 19th-century India.

The letters themselves are fascinating as they offer a practitioner's approach to liberal theory and reform wherein Parmanand argues for a life approach to action rather than a bookish approach. For him, State formation and consolidation was a key project and he found in both the Maratha State of Shivaji as well as that of the Mughals a clear and pragmatic illustration of liberal principles in action. He valued a scientific outlook, whether it was to do with State programmes or with understanding religion and politics. We do not find an uncritical appreciation of everything ancient like, for example, the village community, which

was neither unique to India (he alludes to the Mir in Russia) nor ensured a direct transition to municipal administration. The most impressive idea in his letters was the understanding of intercultural dialogue and an absolute jettisoning of communal prejudice. His ideal was a reformist, paternalist State that would have the confidence and the vision to invite debate and, thereafter, craft a theology that would foster a liberal society. This idea may not be the one we would subscribe to but certainly has merit in that it is both historically grounded and conceptually articulated.

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